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INTERDISCIPLINARY HUMANITIES GRADUATE GROUP NEWSLETTER

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On the cover: UC Merced's New Beginnings sculpture in distortion represents a ubiquity in low-bandwidth and choppy Zoom calls during the COVID-19/digital campus era.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA MERCED

Interdisciplinary **Humanities**

GRADUATE GROUP

FROM THE **Editor**

There's a lot to unpack here, but I'll keep this brief. Earlier this year, COVID-19 entered our world and altered every aspect of the way we live, work, study, and well, everything else. I'll spare my jeremiad (insert your lamentation here, as I could indeed go on). Approximately nine months ago, our campus careened to virtual mode, the archives closed, and hospitals reached maximum capacity. Miraculously, our graduate group newsletter has emerged—despite every inclination that it wouldn't. This third issue of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group newsletter features current graduate students and program alumni. Their pieces span discussions on research for a novel about race, immigration, and agricultural labor; regional and global public health crises both past and present; recently published books relevant to Interdisciplinary Humanities; and post-IH alumni stories of hope and reconciliation. This issue could not have been possible without their contributions and I hope their stories offer respite in an all too harrowing time.

Thank you.



The IHGG Newsletter is made by graduate students for graduate students, and the editor reserves the right to suggest changes or make edits to submitted written pieces in a manner that adheres to each issue's format, theme, word count, and page limit. The Newsletter is intended to feature the professional lives of IHGG graduate students and faculty beyond their critical work. Our contributing authors' views are their own and they do not necessarily represent the views of the IHGG or the University of California. If you would like to feature your work or publicize an event on a future issue, please contact IH graduate student, Ivan Gonzalez-Soto, at isoto5@ucmerced.edu.

STAYING ON THE EDGE: 2020-2021 MUST READ BOOKS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY HUMANITIES



WELL-RECEIVED. HIGHLY ANTICIPATED & CROSS-DISCIPLINARY.

by Laura Gomez | PhD Candidate

As the academy becomes increasingly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, our Graduate Group is poised to contribute innovative research. The following books, just to mention a few, provide a brief overview of current research and publication trends. These texts are well-received books, highly anticipated that cross disciplines.

Part of the American Crossroad series published by the UC Press, [*Badges Without Borders*](#) connects the militarization of police in the United States with the rise in counterinsurgency abroad through their parallel

efforts of racial control. Opening with a photograph of a prison, Schrader uses this image to characterize the global and domestic relations surrounding policing as part of the United States' imperial project. This text can be used for courses in American Studies, History of Policing, and Race & Law.

A recent 2020 publication, [*Urban Humanities: New Practices for Reimagining the City*](#) provides innovative methods for which to demonstrate social relations across time and space. A collection of essays, on Pacific Rim Cities—Shanghai, Tokyo, Los Angeles, and Mexico City—the contributors produce three-dimensional renderings of their research topics, including street vendors, sidewalks, and kids at play. The contributors to this text urge that researchers apply interdisciplinary practices to collaborative projects. Separated into different case studies, this is an excellent text to review for an introduction to current urban humanities methods.

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Published in June 2020, [*Cultivating Their Own: Agriculture in Western Kenya during the "Development" Era*](#) provides a local history of the impacts of the Green Revolution in Kenya using four rural development projects. Dr. Saeteurn uses government and organizational documents as well as oral histories to interrogate the agrarianism project deployed by the nationalist government following independence. A local history anchored in national and global discourse, this text highlights the agency of rural people.

An analysis of Latin urban landscapes, [*Abstract Barrios: The Crises of Latinx Visibility in Cities*](#) uses the work of architects, urban planners, and designers, to document the latinization of urban spaces. The deliberate construction of an "urbanized Latinidad", Dr. Johana Londoño argues, serves as a site of consumption for white, middle-class Americans and is essential to understanding the cycles of U.S. urbanism, decay and reconstruction. Juxtaposing barrios and the Latinization of cities, this text incorporates Latinx Studies, Urban Studies, and American Studies.

The highly anticipated book, [*History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*](#), written by Dr. Ma Vang is set to be released February 2021 by Duke University Press. This text expands Avery Gordon's theorization of hauntings to present a methodology from which academics can address silenced histories. Dr. Vang centers the fugitive histories of Hmong refugees using a wealth of sources including personal histories, lived experiences, and critical readings of redacted U.S. government documents on the secret war in Laos.

If you are looking for a publishing guide, *Research and Publications Planner: The Graduate Student's Guide to Publishing Academic Research* is a fill-in book authored by a graduate student. This planner provides a single place for recording and brainstorming ideas for research projects, conferences, and publications. As graduate students progress

in their programs, the *Research and Publications Planner* makes a good companion for recording future research, academic, and collaborative projects.

As we all work towards completing our degrees and contributing to our respective field(s), these recent publications provide brief insight into current dialogues. The texts reviewed herein cover a variety of sources, provide innovative methods, incorporate distinct theories, and a few demonstrate the application of interdisciplinary research into real spaces and lives. While these books reflect the contemporary academic discourses, they are also great sources to guide our research, writing, and course preparation.

Laura Gomez's research explores the relationship between labor, race, and space in California's Central Valley. Gomez applies interdisciplinary methods to historical material to recuperate the history of farmworker housing and its significance to the material and ideological production of urban and suburban centers.

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Alumni Spotlight

Neama Alamri, PhD

Interdisciplinary Humanities

Dr. Alamri is a historian of race, empire, and labor in the Yemeni diaspora. She earned her Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Humanities from the University of California, Merced. She holds a B.A. in both English and Women's Studies with a minor in Middle East Studies from California State University, Fresno. - *Society of Fellows*



We reached out to Dr. Alamri for an update on her academic career. Here's what she had to say via email:

What is your professional title?

[Cotsen Postdoctoral Fellow in Race and Ethnicity Studies in the Society of Fellows](#), 2020-2023 & a Lecturer in the Council of the Humanities and History [at Princeton University.]

What happened between the defense and now?

Following my defense last April 2020, I took some time away from writing, read some books outside of my research area, and enjoyed chasing around my one-year-old son. Having spent the year elbow deep in writing and revising, I knew I needed a break from my dissertation in order to gain some perspective for what I am hoping will be the book project. By August, I started my first semester as a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer with the Society of Fellows at Princeton University. This included teaching a seminar on Arab American histories, participating in weekly seminars with the Society, and working

on revising my dissertation into a book. The weekly seminars with the Society include conversations amongst various scholars across disciplines, which I believe the IHGG prepared me for.

Can you tell us more about your current work?

My current book project, which stems from my dissertation, "[Long Live the Arab Worker: A Transnational History of Labor & Empire in the Yemeni Diaspora](#)," examines how Yemeni workers and activists, throughout the 20th century, highlighted the connections between local challenges in the diaspora with global politics of empire.

Any helpful tips for IH students?

One tip I would give current IH graduate students is to take your progress one day and one step at a time. This is especially important given all the uncertainty and challenges this past year. It is ok to have days where you simply can't work, all we can do is keep trying.

Learn more about Dr. Alamri's postdoctoral research at:
sf.princeton.edu/people/neama-alamri

Alumni Update + Words of Encouragement

with Trevor Albertson, PhD

Dr. Albertson earned his PhD [in World Cultures*] at UC Merced in 2009. Currently he is the Interim President of Lassen College. Prior to this he served as tenure-track faculty at the Air Command and Staff College (2015-2018). His first book, [*Winning Armageddon*](#) was published in 2019; he is working on his second book, tentatively titled *Arson: Curtis LeMay and the Burning of Japan*.



"PhD programs are filled with setbacks...but so is life in general. The mark of success is not the challenges put before you, but how you respond to them." - T. Albertson

A message to current IHGG graduate students:

While it is, in "normal" times exceptionally difficult to complete a PhD, this past year has only larded more challenges on top of that task. What I can say is that it is worth finishing, no matter what you choose to do next. At the same time, I think you will find your education at UC Merced to be well respected. Good luck and happy researching!

Learn more about Dr. Albertson's current work through a recent story on the official [UC Merced Newsroom](#).

*Interdisciplinary Humanities was formerly World Cultures.



COUNTER BIGOTRY AMID COVID-19

By Gwen Kuan-ying Kuo | PhD Candidate

Like many minority groups in the US, Asian communities often encounter racial profiling and prejudice. A recent example is associated with the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic, alongside mainstream narratives that label it as the "Chinese virus." How does this violent term and its implied racism put diverse groups of people in danger? Our Interdisciplinary Humanities program has equipped me with theoretical tools for further examination.

Describing the precarious virus as "Chinese," in fact, has a long history in the California Gold Rush era (1848-1855). The majority of San Franciscans at the time believed in "miasma theory"—instead of scientifically-proven "germ theory"—wherein epidemic diseases were thought to spread by breathing dirty air in Chinatown.¹ Connecting disease with anti-Chinese sentiment has co-existed since the 19th century, and such bigotry hurts not only Chinese communities, but also Asian people as a whole. The underpaid, but hardworking Coolie laborers who built the first transcontinental railroad that shortened traveling time between San Francisco and New York from nearly six months to less than a week, unfortunately, suffered from the xenophobic Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

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STOP DISCRIMINATING

COUNTER BIGOTRY AMID COVID-19

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But the history of violence that Asian communities experienced continues: the Chinese massacre in Los Angeles (1871); the discrimination against Filipino farmworkers who work in California's vast agricultural fields; the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII; the Red Scare against Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese people during the Cold War (1947-1991); the continued struggles facing Southeast Asian refugees; and, today's COVID-19 outbreak-related racism worsens the historical trauma of anti-Asian sentiment.

To address racial profiling, we should recognize how the problematic presumption of Chineseness is discursively produced. Applying Martin Heidegger's theory on the modern world picture, cultural critic Rey Chow explores how ethnic groups are conceived as an image.² Similar to a stereotype only tracing a façade, Chineseness reduces different groups of people to a symbol.³ The notion of Chineseness is imposed by two folds of cultural hegemony: Firstly, the "otherness" distinguished from the West; and secondly, the governing authority in China centralizes a homogenous national identity with dominant Han culture to empower its nationalism.

Mainland China, unlike Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Macau, has not been occupied by foreign colonial forces. But this "absence of the enemy" has accelerated China's internal colonization. (Chow 1993) In other words, both Western and Chinese hegemony produce and reinforce the concept of Chineseness that reduces individual significance.

Hence, the "Chinese virus" is powerful name-calling for political purposes during the intensifying US-China trade war in a critical pre-election time. Worse still, the problem of "ethnic gloss" would lump all Asian people into potential victims of racism.⁴ This threatening, but indiscriminate virus becomes a useful political weapon that triggers Yellow Peril fear and xenophobia in the US at the cost of numerous minority groups around the globe.⁵

1. Early Chinese immigrants, working mostly as low-wage Coolie laborers, were forced to quarantine in certain blocks of different cities, that later became Chinatowns, were seen as ghettoish and backwards. See Laureen D. Hom, "Early Chinese Immigrants Organizing for Healthcare: The Establishment of the Chinese Hospital in San Francisco," In *Handbook of Asian American Health*, pp. 353-362. Springer, New York, NY, 2013.

2. According to Martin Heidegger, technology defines modernity; modern technology has reproduced the world as a picture being easily conceived by human-beings. We make scientific pictures to represent and manage the world. See Martin Heidegger, "The age of the world picture." In *Science and the Quest for Reality*, pp. 70-88. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1977.

3. See Rey Chow, *Writing diaspora: Tactics of intervention in contemporary cultural studies*. Vol. 785. Indiana University Press, 1993.

4. The attack of an Asian family, including two children aged 2 and 6, at a Sam's Club at Midland, Texas, on March 14, 2020 was but one example. The suspect explained his motive as "he thought the family was Chinese and infecting people with the coronavirus." See ABC News, "FBI warns of potential surge in hate crimes against Asian Americans amid coronavirus," March 27, 2020.

5. The anti-Chinese sentiment and the Yellow Peril myth, see Greenberry G. Rupert. *The yellow peril: Or, the Orient vs. the Occident as viewed by modern statesmen and ancient prophets*. Vol. 4. Union Publishing Company, 1911.

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How Iranian Princess Taj al-Saltana Saw a 19th Century Global Pandemic

By: Amanda Caterina Leong | PhD Student

This article originally appeared on Ajam Media Collective: ajammc.com/2020/11/15/taj-al-saltana-global-pandemic/

"Throughout the year in Persia, and particularly in Tehran, several fatal, infectious diseases rage because of unhygienic conditions. The streets are all filthy – in winter covered in mud and sludge, and in the summer dusty and dirt-encrusted. The watercourses are open and the filth from the houses is washed away into them. This water circulates through the town and people drink it and fall prey to all manner of maladies. [...] Despite the fact that individuals who form corporations and take money from the people for public works- such as Haji Malek and other companies- give nothing back to the people but loss and regret [...]. We seek progress and material acquisitions through unlawful channels, and that is why we never succeed or attain our goal."

The above was written by Iranian Princess Taj al-Saltana in her memoirs, which were translated and published as *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernity 1884-1936*. It is one of the only female-authored memoirs written during the Qajar period of Iran.

Taj al-Saltana, apart from being the daughter of Naser al-Din Shah, was a prominent intellectual and pioneering activist who fought for constitutionalism, freedom, and women's rights in Iran. She wrote these words as she watched a cholera pandemic devastate Iran, [one of many](#) in the late nineteenth century.

Numerous cholera outbreaks, spread through war, trade, bad living conditions, and poor sanitation infrastructure, devastated turn of the century Iran and much of the world, providing a basis for Taj al-Saltana to argue against the wider ills of society that she believed the mishandling of these epidemics exposed.

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In her memoir, Taj al-Saltana criticizes the failure of Iran's Qajar government to control cholera, arguing it is due to poor governance, indicting patriarchy and corruption for the malaises facing the country.

Despite having been written more than a hundred years ago looking specifically at the cholera epidemic in Iran, Taj al-Saltana's memoir has found new relevance in the age of COVID-19 and the failures of governance it has exposed worldwide.



Zahra Khanum Taj al-Saltana, the daughter of Maryam Turan al-Saltana and Nasir al-Din Shah. (Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies, *Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran*)



Road near Borujerd, western Iran. (© The Nelson Collection of Qajar Photography, Antoin Sevruguin)PIN

In her memoir, Taj al-Saltana argues that the cholera epidemic in Iran is a punishment by "divine wrath."

But her view is not fatalistic; she argues that God's wrath is due to the Qajar government's failure to follow the "Circle of Justice," a Persian concept of rule which mandated that rulers legitimized by God are expected to rule with justice by caring for the welfare of its subjects.

Taj al-Saltana invokes God's wrath to blame the government for its failure to maintain good hygiene in cities and to combat "contamination":

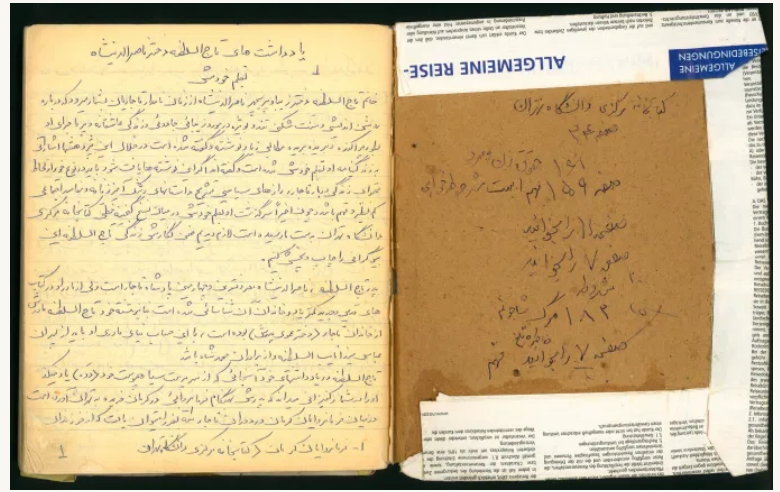
"Though this epidemic was a sign of divine wrath and chastisement, we can still say that it was engendered by inattention to hygiene and the contamination of the water. Every government's first duty is to see the cleanliness of the streets and the water, as well as the tranquility of the people."

By invoking God's wrath, Taj al-Saltana is able to use religion to mobilize her very scientific and intellectual argument about hygiene. She does not only reprimand the government for their failure to prevent the epidemic.

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Women in Tehran collecting water from a sardab, an underground waterwell, around the turn of the century (© The Nelson Collection of Qajar Photography, Antoin Sevruguin)



Transcript of Taj al-Saltana's memoir ([Taj Iran Zarghami Fasihi Collection](#), Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran)

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She further goes on to argue that "hygiene," specifically a return to "cleanliness of the streets and water" and "tranquility of the people," can only be attained by acknowledging the humanity of Iranian women like herself and allowing them to be active in public life, a cause for which Taj al-Saltana was a passionate advocate:

"If women in this country were as free as in other countries, enjoyed comparable rights, could enter the realm of government and politics, and could advance their lives [...] I would choose a legitimate way and a determined plan for my advancement."

In the following passage, Taj al-Saltana states what she would do if she were the ruler of Iran. She shows her female and even male readers how women like herself could be better rulers capable of restoring justice to Iranian people in the form of social and economic progress.

Crowning Anguish becomes a "mirror for princesses" that educates female readers on the possibility of being an ideal female ruler by showing what women can and should do for Iran:

"I would adhere to a conservative position, not for my personal good but for the commonwealth. I would make every effort to promote trade within Persia. I would build factories, not like the Rabi'ov soap-making plant, but ones that will make us independent of foreign trade. I would tap mines, which God has liberally bestowed on Persia. I would seize the rights to the Bakhtiyari oil fields which generate tremendous annual profits, not leave them to the British. I would find the means to facilitate agriculture and provide its necessities. I would build the Mazandaran highway and regulate the transportation of essential commodities. As they do in California, I would hand over barren land to the people and ask them to make it productive. I would dig numerous irrigation wells and create artificial forests. I would divert the Karaj River towards the city and thereby rescue the people from the misery of filthy water."

With her plans for transforming Iran, Taj al-Saltana challenges the dominant notion held during that period of women as "uninformed" and not capable of "finding a lawful way toward advancement," especially when "the man of [their] land have found no way to progress."

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Although Taj al-Saltana never managed to become Iran's ruler, many of the plans she proposes in her memoir would be successfully carried out in the 20th century. And following her, many more Iranian women became active in public life, taking part in the Constitutional Revolution and women's activism throughout the 20th century.

Her memoir has special meaning today, as another pandemic raging around the world highlights the failures of existing political systems and the urgent need for reform.

The fact that hers is a woman's voice is especially important; today, Iranian women make up [90% of frontline nurses](#) and face the highest risk of [getting infected](#), while recent campaigns like the [#metoo movement](#) taking over Iranian social media and new [book covers](#) designed to fight against the erasure of women from textbooks highlight the active role of Iranian women on the frontlines of fighting for change and demanding inclusion.

Taj al-Saltana at one time mentions that she knows her struggle is a long one, urging her readers to remember that "one deception must not make us withdraw from the arena" but that instead, they should keep fighting.

A century later, her words and resistance against the failures of patriarchal governments to stop pandemics ring truer than ever, and urges us to come up with better strategies of reform to challenge hegemonic socio-political structures.



Taj al-Saltana (Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies, Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran)

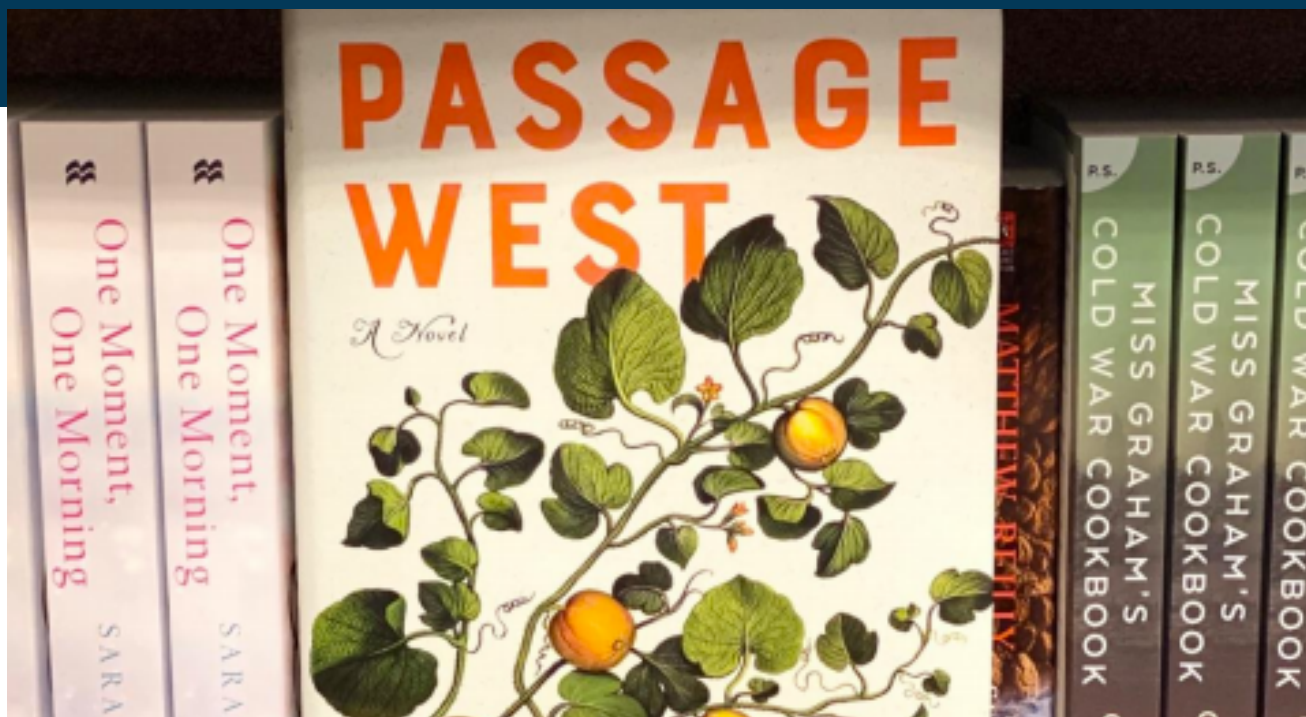


A street in Tehran in the late 19th or early 20th century (© The Nelson Collection of Qajar Photography, Antoin Sevruguin) PIN

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BLENDING LITERATURE AND HISTORY IN THE IMPERIAL VALLEY



(A photo of *Passage West*: A Novel taken at Fresno, California's Barnes and Noble)

My Experience as a Researcher for *Passage West: A Novel* by Rishi Reddi

Written by Amrit Deol | PhD Candidate

In early February 2019, I received an email from a professor with the opportunity of a lifetime: to serve as a researcher for award-winning author [Rishi Reddi](#) on her upcoming novel *Passage West* (2020). The novel centers around the uniquely melded histories of Punjabi, Mexican, and Japanese immigrants in California's Imperial Valley in the early 1900s. *Passage West* follows Ram Singh who, fleeing racial violence in Oregon, arrives in the Imperial Valley in 1914 looking to secure work. The Imperial Valley presents itself as an entirely new social and political landscape for Ram and we see how this impacts all aspects of his life. Reddi was looking for a researcher who was

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The novel centers around the uniquely melded histories of Punjabi, Mexican, and Japanese immigrants in California's Imperial Valley in the early 1900s.

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familiar with Punjabi immigration history and would be able to help shape the social, political, and religious experiences of the Punjabi-Sikh characters. I immediately accepted the role, not only because it aligned perfectly with my own research interests, but also as an Imperial Valley native, I was thoroughly invested in the project.

Over the course of a year, we looked into many aspects of the Punjabi-Sikh immigrant experience to help replicate an environment that was deeply informed by the history of Punjab and California. For example, Rishi and I researched which regions of Punjab various characters belonged to, what was the popular social etiquette in Punjab and California at the time, and even which farming techniques were being used across villages in Punjab and were brought over to California. The novel was truly informed by the historical realities of Punjabis that lived in Imperial Valley during that

time. Various moments in *Passage West* were inspired by events that we found in personal records, newspaper articles, and even court cases. As a researcher for *Passage West*, I learned what it means to look for the humanity in history, to find a moment in a historical record, and to weigh the emotion within the archival materials left behind. Working with Rishi Reddi taught me invaluable lessons on how to be an interdisciplinary scholar and I hope to bring those elements into my own dissertation work.

Passage West: A Novel is now widely available online and at your local bookstores. If interested in California history, I highly recommend you pick it up (it will definitely be difficult to put down). My experience as a researcher for *Passage West* taught me the value of writing with emotion and how the blending of literature and history can provide insight into human experience.

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As a researcher
for *Passage
West*, I learned
what it means to
look for the
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A BLURB ON BUILDING COMMUNITY

By: Amanda Caterina Leong, PhD Student

What a year! While COVID-19 has delineated us from our usual paths and distanced us from each other, it has also forced us to confront what we have been avoiding: the need for things to move in a new direction.

Curiosity, risk-taking, and collaboration are the exact tools

we all need to face this curvy, winding path in front of us. We need to think outside of the box and be willing to move in new directions for positive progress.

With this, I call for interested IH students and beyond to come together as a community, to carry out collaborative work so

that we can find new ways of translating the relevancy of our research to both an academic and public audience!

Feel free to drop me an email at: **aleong11@ucmerced.edu** if interested!

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Volume 2
Issue 1

IHGG NEWSLETTER

*The newsletter of the
Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group*

November 8, 2019 | by Shiloh Green Soto

What Shiloh didn't know would be their last academic conference for a long, long time.
American Studies Association. Honolulu, Hawai'i.